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Coop Chat : About Annual Meetings

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Rural Electrification Administration
Washington, 25, D. C.

May 9, 1947

To All REA Co-op Officials:

It is not possible, in my opinion, to exaggerate the importance of the annual meeting of an REA co-op.

The history of the co-op movement throughout the world teaches us that co-ops can function most effectively only if the members are able and willing to meet together regularly to look after their co-op business. Many a once thriving American farm co-op of the last century fell eventually by the wayside largely because its members developed a "let George do it" attitude and stayed away from co-op business meetings. And it is well known that one of the first steps in the systematic destruction of co-ops in the Nazi-occupied countries was to forbid the co-op members to meet together to protect their co-op interests. Now that European cooperators can again meet together, plan together and act together, the revival of their co-op business enterprises is making rapid progress. They know that democratic member control is the key to co-op success.

Of course, good attendance at annual meetings will not of itself assure intelligent member control. Only a well-informed membership can do that. Member education activities should therefore be carried on all through the year. But what happens at your annual meeting is of utmost importance to the health and welfare of your co-op.

Because every director as well as the manager has a personal responsibility toward making the annual meeting a success, I am sure that each of you will be interested in reading thoughtfully the attached statement on "The Why and How of REA Co-op Annual Meetings." Even though your next annual meeting date may be some months in the future, I hope that you will keep this statement for ready reference when the time for planning approaches.

Sincerely,

Claude R. Wickard

Administrator

Attachment

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The Why and How of REA Co-op Annual Meetings

No matter how successful an REA co-op may be financially, it is headed for eventual trouble unless its board and management can get the members to take an active interest in co-op affairs. Failure to make member control effective is a reflection on the board's ability or willingness to carry out faithfully, in spirit as well as to the letter, the full legal responsibilities with which the members as owners of the co-op enterprise have entrusted it.

But member control can be exercised only at members' meetings. That is why the bylaws require the board to hold at least one members' meeting each year. However, this annual meeting can function only if enough members are represented to make a quorum. That is why the board is under obligation to make every possible effort to assure a representative member attendance. Good annual meetings don't just happen.

The following suggestions are offered to aid REA co-op boards and managers in planning and holding successful annual meetings. They are drawn from the practical experience of REA co-ops in many places. In considering any of them, it is well to remember that the best planning will do little good unless it is properly coordinated and followed through with determination and with adequate attention to detail.

Essentials for a good annual meeting

1. Careful planning.
2. A meeting date and hour which will make it convenient for members to attend.
3. An adequate meeting place.
4. Good publicity.
5. An interesting program.
6. Assurance of a real election by secret ballot.
7. A competent chairman.

Other means of promoting attendance

8. An attendance committee of neighborhood leaders.
9. Musical entertainment.
10. Movies.
11. An instructive talk or demonstration.
12. An appliance exhibit (home-made or otherwise).
13. A playlet, skit or quiz contest.
14. A few useful attendance prizes.
15. Refreshments.

Start planning early

If possible, planning for the annual meeting should begin at least three months in advance. Since co-op boards generally meet only once a month, the reason for this suggestion is obvious. Some co-op boards have found it very helpful to devote some time at the first regular board meeting after an annual meeting to a review of the annual meeting just held. A frank discussion will bring out any shortcomings and will indicate how next year's meeting can be made better in various respects. The conclusions are made a part of the minutes of that board meeting and are referred to again when the time comes to plan for the next annual meeting. Further comments concerning the items listed above, in the order of listing, follow:

1. Overall Planning. This is the board's responsibility, but the manager should share in it and should be charged with looking after the carrying out of the plans and with coordinating the work of the various committees.

a. Review Bylaws. The first step is to consider all bylaw provisions which have any bearing on the annual meeting, so as to make sure of what is legally required to be done. Thus the board will know what board action to take and when. If in the board's opinion the bylaws need revision in any respect, this is a good time to consider suitable amendments and to get REA's advice on the best wording, so that they will be ready for inclusion in the annual meeting notice. The board should also make sure that every member who has not yet received a copy of the co-op bylaws will be mailed one without delay so that he will know his rights and responsibilities as a member.

b. Committee Assignments. Responsibility for preparing and getting out official notices, ballots, etc., can be delegated to a committee consisting of the president, the secretary and the manager, who may wish to call on the co-op attorney for assistance. If the bylaws call for the appointment of a Nominating Committee, suitable board action should be taken at the proper time. This committee should be encouraged to nominate more candidates than are to be elected so that the voters will have some choice and will know that they are not expected to be mere rubber stamps. A board will generally find it helpful to establish also committees on publicity, on entertainment, on refreshments and on attendance. These committees should be made up largely from the co-op membership. Even the chairmen need not necessarily be directors. The important point is to select persons of initiative who can be depended on to do a good job.

c. Physical Equipment. It is usual for the manager to take care of all physical equipment required in connection with the meeting, such as tables for registration at the door and for the officers, a blackboard, ballot boxes, prepared tally sheets, duplicate membership lists, loud speaker, movie projector, etc., and to make sure of adequate electric connections. He should check with each committee as to its special needs, make a list of all items required and make sure that they will be available when needed. Much confusion and waste of time at the meeting can thus be prevented.

2. Time of Meeting.

a. Meeting Date. This date is fixed by the bylaws. If past experience shows that it was badly chosen from the standpoint of promoting member attendance, the bylaws should be amended to provide for a more suitable date, taking into consideration local climatic conditions and farming practices. But even without changing the bylaws, a co-op can shift its annual meeting in any particular year to a later date than that fixed in the bylaws, by a board resolution to postpone the annual meeting and to hold a special members' meeting in

its stead on such and such a date (of the same year, of course). However, such shifts are not advisable unless there are very important reasons.

b. Hour of Meeting. A co-op spread over a large area and having as members mostly farm people will find a day-time meeting preferable to an evening meeting. Depending on the time required for the program, a meeting may start at 10 A. M. or later. In any case, the official business should be concluded at an hour which will permit the farmer members to get home in time for their evening chores.

3. Meeting Place. The bylaws usually specify the town or village where the annual meeting must be held. The selection of a suitable hall (or, in summer, perhaps a park or fairground) is up to the board. Ample seating capacity for all attending members and guests should be assured. Arrangements for a meeting place should be made early, to make sure that the desired place will be available on the specified day. Civic and school auditoriums, lodge halls and theaters seem to be preferred by most co-ops. But churches and court rooms are also used. For large meetings, a public address system should be provided.

4. Publicity. Planning for effective publicity should also be begun several months before the meeting. The monthly co-op newsletter should start telling about the meeting at least two month in advance and build up the members' interest in attending. It should stress the fact that the co-op belongs to its members and that its success depends largely upon the interest the members take in its affairs. Some co-ops publish in their newsletters such items as a financial and operating statement, the president's report, a discussion of special matter to be taken up, a list of invited prominent guests, etc. It is also a good idea to urge the members to read their by-laws again. If a co-op has no regular newsletter, it can nevertheless issue a special one before the annual meeting.

Since the annual meeting is news in the communities reached by the co-op, local papers are generally glad to carry one or more advance news stories about the co-op and its annual meeting if the co-op office supplies them with the information. Usually it is also possible to get announcements over local radio stations. Many co-ops arrange to have announcements made at community and farm organization meetings, at churches and in the rural schools in the area so that the children of co-op members can remind their parents.

5. The Program. While this is a business meeting of the member-owners, it should be made of interest to the families of the members as well. By combining some of the features explained later with the official business, a better attendance can usually be promoted. But the program should be planned so that it will not run longer than the time allowed for it. The typical order of business is listed in the bylaws. It will help to keep the following points in mind.

a. Roll Call. The checking of members present (and of proxies, if any) should be done as members enter the hall. There should be several checkers at the door, each with a correct membership list, to prevent a bottleneck. Ballots, programs, etc., should be given to members as they register. Registration takes less time if members have been mailed a special postcard reminder which they were asked to bring along and hand in at the door. These cards can also be used later for the drawing of attendance prizes.

b. Reports. For the benefit of the new members and guests present, the chairman should always begin this part of the program with a brief explanation of what a REA co-op is and of the basic principles which guide its

functioning as a non-profit private enterprise. He should point out that it belongs to its members and that the directors serve as trustees at the members' pleasure and without salaries. All of the important facts are contained in "A Guide For Members of REA Cooperatives," which the chairman might wish to review when preparing this brief talk.

The officers' reports should be brief and to the point. The most comprehensive report is usually given by the manager. Avoid reading off a lot of figures and statistics which the audience cannot remember anyhow. Financial and statistical data can be discussed more intelligently if the members have been given copies, either by mail or at the door. The use of large wall charts helps also. After each report, members should be encouraged to ask questions, and the speaker or the chairman should make a sincere effort to answer them fully.

6. Nomination and Election.

a. Nominations. After announcement of the nominations made prior to the meeting (by a nomination committee, as district-meetings or by petition, as the case may be), the chairman must (if the bylaws so provided) give a fair opportunity for additional nominations from the floor. This is particularly important if only the required number of candidates has been nominated in advance. A secret ballot is meaningless if there is no choice of candidates. The chairman should not recognize any motion to close nominations until there are at least two candidates for each office or until at least 30 seconds have passed since the last nomination.

b. Election. The bylaws specify election to be by ballot, which means a secret unsigned ballot under most state laws. This requirement cannot be relaxed by a vote of the members present, even if no one objects openly. The ballot should provide adequate space for write-in candidates. The chairman should appoint enough tellers or election officers to make a speedy counting of votes possible. They should work in teams of three, to prevent mistakes. The statement presented by the tellers' chairman to the chairman of the meeting should list all candidates and the number of votes received by each, and then state the names of the successful candidates. This statement should be read to the meeting by the chairman or secretary. The ballots and tally sheets should be preserved for at least two months.

7. The Chairman's Function. Whether the meeting will be lively or wearisome, interesting or boring, a demonstration of cooperation and real democracy or a disheartening sample of undemocratic manipulation will depend on the chairman more than on anyone else. While an ideal chairman is hard to find, most REA co-op presidents should have no difficulty in doing a good job if they act on the following suggestions:

The chairman should study in advance all bylaws provisions that apply to the annual meeting and to matters likely to be taken up. He should have an up-to-date copy of the bylaws handy. Also he should be familiar with the REA booklet "Rules of Order" which is available on request, and should keep it handy for reference.

A good chairman knows and sticks to the rules; is fair to everyone; speaks loud enough so that he can be heard; insists on democratic procedure; encourages members to take active part; makes sure that everyone understands what is being discussed or voted on; keeps the meeting from dragging and makes the audience feel at ease.

8. Attendance Committee. During the war years, excellent results were obtained by a few REA co-ops by setting up a large attendance committee including key members in every community or neighborhood served by the co-op. Official notices of appointment were followed up with special group meetings by districts, at which the manager explained what was expected of the committee members and why. These key members were also mailed advance information from time to time as plans for the meeting were shaping up. It was their job to get their neighbor members interested in the annual meeting and to arrange for pooling of transportation which they did quite effectively. Such a committee is needed especially if no annual meetings were held in recent years or if past meetings were poorly attended due to lack of member interest.

9. Music. Group singing of lively songs helps to pep up meetings and to create a friendly atmosphere of fellowship. Some REA co-ops even provide their own song sheets, with some old-time favorites and sometimes with new appropriate words written to well-known tunes. It is often possible to get a good local high school band to play an opening march and support the singing.

10. Movies. The best time for movies is before or after the business meeting or while the ballots are being counted. Projectors can usually be borrowed locally. If you don't know where, your county agent can probably help locate one. The best source of films is your regional Y.M.C.A. film library whose address is obtainable from local Y.M.C.A. secretaries. REA has a few films available. Also, several electrical equipment manufacturers have interesting films on electricity and its applications. The Cooperative League of the U.S.A. has films on various co-op subjects. If you plan to use movies, make your arrangements early, to be sure you will get the films you want. Don't fail to specify whether 16 or 35mm, sound or silent.

11. Educational Talk. The annual meeting offers an excellent opportunity for some member education. A short talk by a good speaker on the REA program, on the co-op movement, on area coverage, or on farm or home uses of electricity can help to build membership support. Good speakers can be found among farm co-op or civic leaders, extension workers and other rural educators from local schools or from the state college.

12. Appliance Exhibit. An exhibit of well-selected appliances and equipment will not only attract a larger attendance but will also help to promote the increased use of electricity. Moreover, it offers a good opportunity for interesting the local dealers in the co-op and in the appliance needs of its members. Merchants participating in the exhibit will usually want to advertise the fact in the local papers and thus help to promote attendance at the meeting.

Actual appliances should be shown in operation, if possible. Emphasis should be on farm applications. Interest in water systems can be stimulated through pictures and miniature exhibits showing what running water can do on the farm. An exhibit of home-made appliances may be a successful feature if it is publicized that prizes will be awarded for the better ones.

13. Other Entertainment. Several co-ops have made a practice of featuring amateur talent from different sections of the co-op area. If good judgment is used, this may work very well. Some co-ops have made use of professional entertainers from local radio stations. A playlet or skit produced under the direction of a high school teacher may turn out to be a feature attraction. A quiz contest can combine good fun with getting useful facts across to the

members. Questions should be about the co-op and about rural electrification. Light bulbs can be used for prizes (25 watt bulbs for booby prizes).

14. Attendance Prizes. The drawing power of attendance prizes can easily be overrated. They will not make up for a poorly conducted meeting, but they usually are of some value as an incentive to attendance. Some co-ops regularly get a number of attendance prizes contributed by local merchants. Co-op funds should be used sparingly for such purpose. A few inexpensive electric appliances are most appropriate. Of course, only members present in person should be eligible. Some co-ops also award a prize to the member having come the greatest distance.

15. Refreshments. A co-op annual meeting is a community affair and therefore should not be without sociability. In case of a daytime meeting, a committee can arrange for a light lunch or at least for some refreshments to be served with the members' own package lunches. Sometimes, arrangements are made with an organization, home demonstration or church club to serve lunches at a moderate price. At an afternoon or evening meeting, it usually makes for a most satisfactory ending if light refreshments are served right after official adjournment. This gives members a chance to get better acquainted and to meet the board and paid personnel.

To Summarize: The annual meeting is an essential element of co-op functioning. To get the members to come, the board must convince them that they are needed and that they will find the meeting worthwhile. This means a well-prepared business meeting conducted democratically, a real election by secret ballot, and just enough recreational features and sociability to assure a good time for all who come. It's really a simple formula, and it works.

